

Finding the Sweet Spot

To understand where the most effective teaching occurs, it might help to introduce a term used in baseball and other sports—the “sweet spot.” In baseball, the sweet spot is the spot on the bat that, when hit, carries the ball the farthest. Unfortunately, batters don’t always hit the sweet spot. Sometimes they are jammed and hit the ball off the handle; other times they swing too soon and hit the ball off the end of the bat (which can really hurt the hands). When the sweet spot is missed, the result is almost always the same: the batter is out. However, when the ball hits the sweet spot, the batter knows it immediately. The ball really flies. Hitters describe the feeling of hitting the sweet spot as “true” or “pure.”

When motivating adolescents to read, I am constantly searching for the sweet spot of instruction. Teaching matters, but what kind of teaching matters most? Where is the reading sweet spot? It certainly is not found buried in a 122-page curriculum guide. However, it is also not found when we hand students books that are too difficult for them and ask them to navigate on their own. The sweet spot lies somewhere between these two extreme instructional approaches.

In exploring where that sweet spot might be, it is wise to start with what we know works, and when I start with what I know works, I always return to the work of Nancie Atwell. I can’t think of a single professional book that has shaped my thinking about the teaching of reading more than *In the Middle* (Atwell 1998), which remains the eminent call for teachers to “come out from behind their desks to write with, listen to, and learn” from young readers and writers (Atwell 1998, 12). She reminds us that we, the teachers, are the best readers and writers in our classroom, and as such, each of us should be a “mentor,” a “mediator,” and a “model” (21). Atwell’s model for setting up a reader’s workshop—surrounding students with tons of high-interest reading materials, providing students with ample reading choice, carving out significant time in the school day to read, conducting reading mini-lessons to help students find the reading zone—is still a model I emulate and one that I recommend to new and experienced teachers alike. Certainly, developing our students’ recreational reading habits play a crucial part in helping them to discover the reading flow. We all have been so lost in a book that we lose track of time and place, and we want our students to discover this experience. In this quest, Atwell’s work has been indispensable in building the recreational reading habits of my students.

However, when it comes to helping students become excellent readers of difficult texts, finding the sweet spot of teaching becomes more problematic. It is much easier for a student to find reading flow while reading *Harry Potter* than it is for them to find reading flow while reading *Hamlet*. This is where the impor-

tance of teaching comes into play. risk of killing the play, we also run may spill over into recreational art teach *Hamlet*, students will drown these approaches produce dead rea

Works such as *Hamlet*, 1984, are in the classroom. Most students can own. Our expertise is needed, and whether our students have mean approach difficult works such as *H* kill off our reluctant readers? Certain work into a million pieces is not the solo is not the answer either.

“Lousy Classic” Is

In *The Reading Zone*, Atwell (2007) trying to make sense of adulthood—their schools too often engage them so demanding, so bereft of intention learn is to forgo pleasure reading English” (107). In moving away from dents “learn how to select: Which books selves? Which are page-turners, about which do they want to think about writing about them?” (2007, 115).

As much as I respect Atwell, in my school district, and in most of country, particular titles are mandated grade student in the United States: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Great Gatsby* because they are required. Most of school year to deviate from the required on their shelves, and their school books be taught.

I also differ from Atwell because thing and that there is a real value to reading the same title. When every student it means we all acquire a shared cul

tance of teaching comes into play. If we overtteach *Hamlet*, we not only run the risk of killing the play, we also run the risk of creating a dislike of reading that may spill over into recreational and academic reading. However, if we under-teach *Hamlet*, students will drown (or turn to CliffsNotes for rescue). Both of these approaches produce dead readers.

Works such as *Hamlet*, 1984, and *The Grapes of Wrath* are why you and I are in the classroom. Most students cannot navigate these works expertly on their own. Our expertise is needed, and how this expertise is applied will determine whether our students have meaningful reading experiences. So how can we approach difficult works such as *Hamlet* in our classrooms in a way that will not kill off our reluctant readers? Certainly, as Chapter 3 illustrates, chopping up the work into a million pieces is not the answer. Unfortunately, having students fly solo is not the answer either.

“Lousy Classic” Is an Oxymoron

In *The Reading Zone*, Atwell (2007) reminds us that high school students “are trying to make sense of adulthood—it is really just around the corner now—but their schools too often engage them in a version of reading that is so limiting and so demanding, so bereft of intentionality or personal meaning, that what they learn is to forgo pleasure reading and its satisfactions and, for four years, ‘do English’” (107). In moving away from doing English, Atwell suggests that students “learn how to select: Which books do they need to let settle inside themselves? Which are page-turners, about which there isn’t a whole lot to say? And which do they want to think about more deeply and consider as works of art by writing about them?” (2007, 115).

As much as I respect Atwell, this is where she and I part. For one thing, in my school district, and in most of the districts that I have visited across the country, particular titles are mandated in the curriculum. Nearly every ninth-grade student in the United States reads *Romeo and Juliet*. Other classics, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Julius Caesar*, are taught nationwide because they are required. Most teachers don’t have the wiggle room in their school year to deviate from the required readings. These are the books they have on their shelves, and their school boards and district offices have dictated they be taught.

I also differ from Atwell because I believe a required reading canon is a good thing and that there is a real value that can only be found when the entire class is reading the same title. When every student in the country reads *Romeo and Juliet*, it means we all acquire a shared cultural literacy, a sharing that is foundational if

we, as a culture, are going to be able to communicate with one another (for more on this, see Hirsch's *The Knowledge Deficit* [2006]). Beyond gaining cultural literacy, students who read assigned classics will receive adequate practice when it comes to reading demanding texts. Thus, rigor is not avoided; it is guaranteed. Furthermore, wrestling with *Romeo and Juliet* in a whole-class setting produces richer conversation and deeper thinking than occurs when the work is read individually or in small groups.

As much as I understand how doing English has ruined books for students such as Mem Fox's daughter, Chloe, all students should be required to do English, meaning all students should be required to wrestle with "limiting" and "demanding" works. All students should be engaged in books they might normally avoid. This doesn't mean it has to be an awful, reader-killing experience. If taught in the sweet spot, *Hamlet* should be a work that motivates students to take additional English classes, not convince them to avoid English courses at all costs. *Hamlet* isn't the problem; the problem lies in how the work is taught (or how the work is not taught). Doing English is not the issue; how students do English is the issue. The question isn't whether classics should be taught; the question is how do we get students reading classics to reach the sweet spot?

Identifying the Sweet Spot

When I bring a difficult book into the classroom for students to read, I always struggle with my level of involvement. How much help is too much help? How much help is too little help? What is the right balance? Let's address this delicate balance by first examining the experiences of my daughter, Devin, who was asked to read two difficult books in her high school English class. First, she was given *The Grapes of Wrath* to read on her own. She was not given any purpose or focus. The book was not "framed" at all. Like a good student, she struggled through most of the text, finally giving up from "sheer boredom." She admits now that she turned to SparkNotes to get her to the finish line. When the due date came, she was given a test and an essay question. Now, two years later, she tells me the book "is horrible," and she does "not remember a single thing in it." And she's a good reader.

Later that year her class read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. They were asked to stop repeatedly to work with the text. They had to choose scenes they thought exhibited different levels of satire and go home and film these scenes from the book. They spent hours filming, editing, and presenting these scenes. Not surprisingly, after all this chop-chop, Devin finds *Huckleberry Finn* "stupid and pointless."

Devin graduated from high school with *Wrath* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as required course; they both hold great value. The great side effect occurs when books are assigned: *(The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn)* and exits the work finding deeper comprehension of the work itself. Classics found in a universality of truth found in deeper comprehension of the work. *The Grapes of Wrath*, even though she is at an age in which they have exposure to as many other works, students' imaginative rehearsal of our students need as many classics.

So it is here I propose a classification. "Lousy classic" is an oxymoron. A classic is either valuable in it or it would not have survived in high school actually containing this greatness, if we have because our teachers did not teach a great book by mishandling it; means the reader was not present.

In trying to help my students, literature focuses on the value that every classic should be that every student will like the books. Sure, I'd like them, but it is important that the students know some of my students attain something valuable from them. As I said in Chapter 1, I want them to begin to see how language is manipulated are valuable considerations. Since 1984—not all students are the same; they will leave this book a different concern; it concerns me much more than they.

I am a wiser, more cultured person to read difficult "texts" in

with one another (for more)
beyond gaining cultural lit-
adequate practice when it
t avoided; it is guaranteed.
hole-class setting produces
when the work is read indi-

ruined books for students
should be required to do
wrestle with "limiting" and
in books they might nor-
reader-killing experience. If
that motivates students to
avoid English courses at all
how the work is taught (or
the issue; how students do
ssics should be taught; the
o reach the sweet spot?

r students to read, I always
elp is too much help? How
e? Let's address this delicate
daughter, Devin, who was
English class. First, she was
as not given any purpose or
ood student, she struggled
heer boredom." She admits
e finish line. When the due
n. Now, two years later, she
nember a single thing in it."

Huckleberry Finn. They were
had to choose scenes they
ome and film these scenes
nd presenting these scenes.
ds *Huckleberry Finn* "stupid

Devin graduated from high school in 2008 still believing that *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are awful books. She is wrong, of course; they both hold great value to the modern reader, but this is how readercide occurs when books are undertaught (*The Grapes of Wrath*) or overtaught (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*). If a student reads a major literary work, and exits the work finding it "bereft of intentionality or personal meaning" (Atwell 2007, 107), this is an indictment of the teaching of that work, not of the work itself. Classics found in the canon are there for a reason; there is a wisdom, a universality of truth found in them that helps the modern reader to garner a deeper comprehension of today's world. I am a wiser adult because I have read *The Grapes of Wrath*, even though it was written in 1939. Because our students are at an age in which they are trying to make sense of adulthood, they need exposure to as many other wise works as possible. These books provide our students imaginative rehearsals for the real world, and in today's complex world, our students need as many of these rehearsals as possible.

So it is here I propose a radical stance: there is no such thing as a lousy classic. "Lousy classic" is an oxymoron. By its definition, a classic has something valuable in it or it would not have survived as a classic. Those classics you and I hated in high school actually contain greatness. Every one of them. If we were unable to discover this greatness, if we didn't recognize the value found in these books, it's because our teachers did not help us recognize this value. Because a teacher kills a great book by mishandling it doesn't mean the book is stupid and pointless. It means the reader was not put in a position to discover the book's greatness.

In trying to help my students find that greatness, my teaching of classic literature focuses on the value they will take from the works. I am not suggesting that every classic should be liked; in fact, I never focus on whether my students will like the books. Sure, I'd like my students to enjoy the books as much as I do, but it is important that they take away something valuable after wrestling with them. As I said in Chapter 2, I know some of my students will like 1984, and I know some of my students will not like 1984, but my goal is that all of them will attain something valuable from their reading. After reading 1984, for example, I want them to begin to see privacy issues differently. I want them to recognize how language is manipulated. I want them to learn to question authority. These are valuable considerations to take into adulthood. My students might not like 1984—not all students are enamored of dark, dystopian science fiction—but they will leave this book as wiser, more culturally literate human beings. That concerns me much more than worrying about whether the book is liked.

I am a wiser, more culturally literate human being because I was required to read difficult "texts" in my life. I enjoy museum visits today, for example,

- gain the imaginative rehearsal -
Teacher/student interaction

It wasn't necessarily about liking the book -

because I was required to visit museums with my parents when I was a child. Though I certainly did not start out liking museums—I'd have rather done almost anything than spend a day inside a museum when I was an adolescent. I enjoy the music of Joan Armatrading, even though the first time I listened to her I was put off by her unconventionality. I stuck with it because of a friend's prodding and have since grown to love her music. I enjoy poetry today because I was required to take a course in it in college and was fortunate enough to find a professor who led me to discover its value. Many of the pleasures I enjoy today are a result of the required guidance of others who helped me discover the beauty and value of these pursuits I would not have found had I been left on my own.

Let's never forget there is beauty and value found in reading difficult literature. Our job is to lead our reluctant students to discover this beauty and value.



One of things I like about Atwell's approach is that she eschews the chop-chop philosophy by trusting her students to tackle large chunks of text. As she states, "it just makes sense for English teachers to pass out the books, give students a set amount of time to read them on their own, give a just-the-facts quiz on the day of the deadline if they don't feel the kids can be trusted to read a book without it, then engage in discussions about the whole work of art that the author intended and created, just as many of these students will in their college English classes" (Atwell 2007, 115).

Atwell, of course, is illuminating the dangers that occur when we do not trust our students to read long passages of text. When a good book gets chopped up too much, it ceases to be a good book. However, I cannot hand my students challenging literary works and tell them I will meet them at the finish line. They simply do not have the skills to take that journey on their own. I am a teacher, not an assigner, and my students need me most while they are reading. My job is twofold: (1) to introduce my students to books that are a shade too hard for them and (2) to use my expertise to help them navigate these texts in a way that brings value to their reading experience. Let's explore what achieving these two goals might look like in a classroom.

What You Can Do to Prevent Readicide

The following are specific suggestions on how to find the sweet spot when teaching difficult literature to adolescents.

Recognize the Importance of

Let's revisit the importance that fra
Read the following passage and sco
1 to 10:

The pitcher's stuff was filthy. H
chin music. Along with the hea
his face, producing a number
knock. No one came close to d

How well did you score? The
knowledge of baseball than it doe
baseball will comprehend the pas
with baseball will say it looks like gi
if your baseball knowledge is limi
reach even the simplest level of cor
Figure 4.1 provides a translation.)

What does this mean for teach
we do before students begin read

Original Text
The pitcher's stuff was filthy.
He was bringing cheese.
He mixed in some chin music.
Along with the heat, Uncle Charlie wou occasionally show his face, producing number of bowel-lockers.
Only two batters got a knock.
No one came close to dialing 8.

FIGURE 4.1
BASEBALL CHART